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ABSTRACT

This guide explains the concept of "special play" and provides instructions for parents on how to use this daily 15-minute play period to encourage positive behaviors in their young children. The purpose of special play is to create situations in which children become aware of feelings that they have not previously recognized, build children's feeling of trust in their caregiver, and build children's self-confidence. During these daily sessions, parents should watch the child carefully, talk about what the child is doing, mimic the child's actions, play alongside them, and let the child lead the interaction. Parents should not teach, boss, or judge the child, but simply follow their lead and play with them. The guide discusses limits and restrictions for special play, along with suggestions for special play activities at dressing/undressing time, mealtime, while riding in the car, and at bath time. Self-evaluative questions are included for parents, as well as a form for recording individual adult-child interactions. (MDM)

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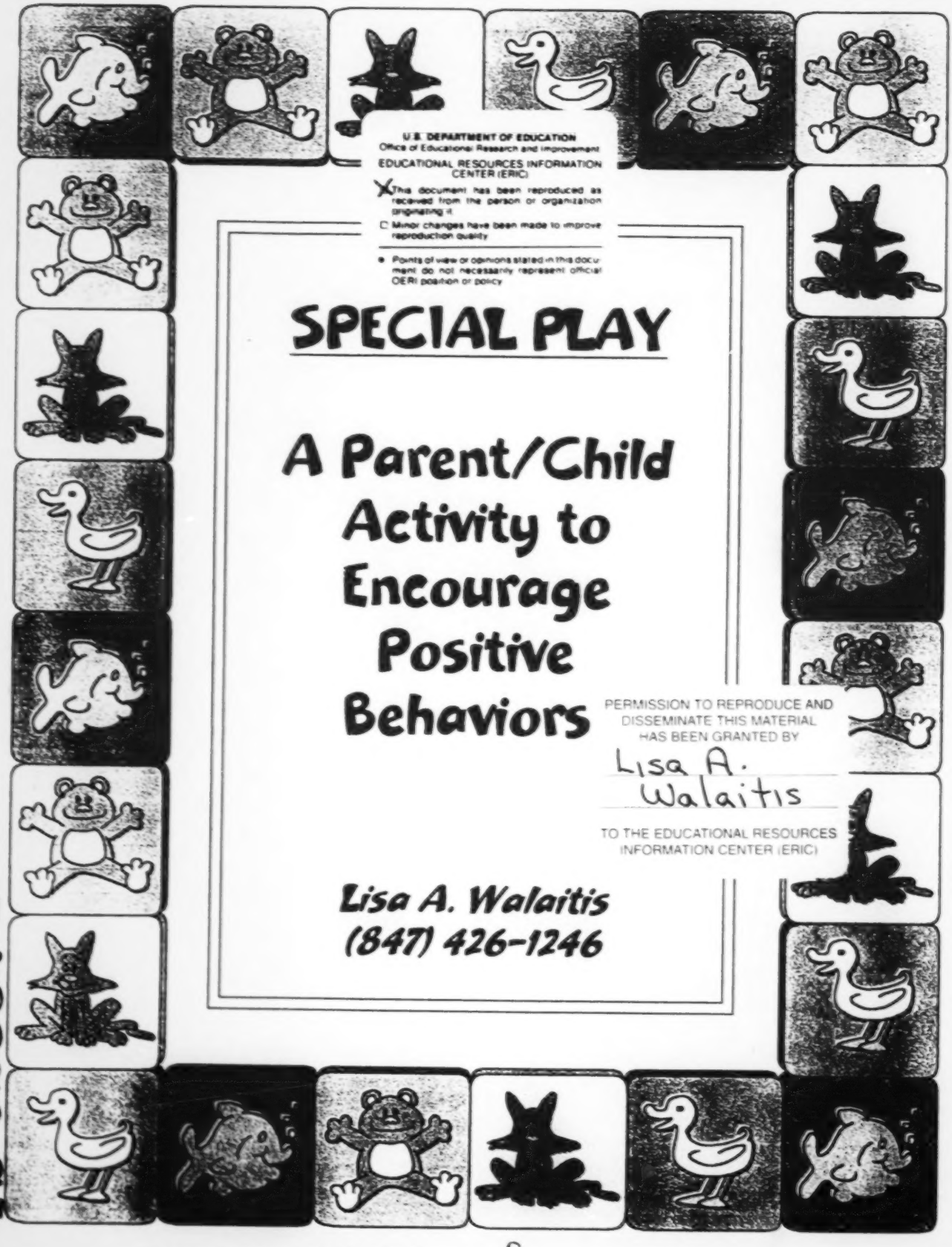

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SPECIAL PLAY

A Parent/Child Activity to Encourage Positive Behaviors

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SPECIAL PLAY

* Healthy emotional development relies heavily on the quality of a child's early relationships with parents, teachers, and other caregivers. Every day we spend with a child influences the way that child will relate to others for the rest of his/her life.

* We now know that these critical early relationships greatly influence a child's self-esteem, inspire creativity and learning, and help to develop the ability to communicate and use language. In essence, how children develop emotionally affects every aspect of their growth and plays a major role in determining whether they will become purposeful, confident, productive, and loving men and women.

* I think that it is sometimes important to attempt to change the general relationship -- along with attempting to handle situations -- between caregiver and child. I am convinced that it is possible to improve this general caregiver-child climate through scheduled play sessions.

* Play sessions can provide occasions to help children develop important personal and interpersonal skills. An extended number (more than one year) of Special Play sessions can assist caregivers and children to become more intimate and more understanding of each other. Although most parents and other adults feel that they know how to play with children such play is not typically designed to help adults and children learn methods of relating to each other in more sensitive ways.

* One purpose of a play session is to create a situation in which children may become aware of the feelings they have not previously recognized or accurately labeled. When you communicate understanding and acceptance of children's feelings, you help them come to a better understanding of how to cope with their feelings as they experience or re-experience difficulties and conflicts in the play sessions.

* Another purpose of the sessions is to help build and/or strengthen children's feelings of trust and confidence in the caregiver. Knowledge and skills acquired during the play sessions can transfer to other adult/child, and maybe even child/child interactions.

* A third purpose is to build children's confidence in themselves.

SPECIAL PLAY

WHAT SPECIAL PLAY IS -

Special Play is an adaptation both of play therapy as well as parent training in behavioral techniques.

Special Play is a philosophy. It embraces the relationship between adults and children in an atmosphere of respect that encourages healthy emotional, social, and intellectual growth. It can be done anywhere, any place, any time. It means opening and closing many circles of communication together.

Special Play is a 15-minute period of time that you spend each day with your child to play together -- just you two. The "rules" for doing Special Play are:

To begin:

* Find a place to play with toys.
* Set a timer for fifteen minutes.
* Do not allow interruptions.
* Call child over for Special Play.

The adult will:

* Watch the child carefully.
* Talk about what the child is doing.
* Comment on what the child seems to like or dislike.
* Mimic the child's actions.
* Play alongside them or with them.
* Let the child lead the interaction.

The adult will not:

* Direct or lead the play.
* Teach the child how to "do it right."
* Pass judgment on the child's activity.

SPECIAL PLAY

RESEARCH AND RATIONALE FOR SPECIAL PLAY

1. Kate Kogan, University of Washington
   * The original research was done in the outpatient Department of Psychiatry with referred clinic children ages two to eight.
   * Mothers were asked to play with their child in a laboratory play room with a one-way mirror behind which stood Dr. Kogan.
   * She would speak into her microphone to the parent who wore a tiny bug in her ear.
   * Parents did Special Play at home daily for fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time for eight weeks.
   * Children showed impressive improvements in their functioning, as measured by Dr. Kogan and published in numerous psychiatric journals.

2. Russel Barkeley
   * Published a book on defiant children.
   * Parents should do special non-directive, non-judgmental play with the child twenty minutes a day.
   * It bonds the parent-child dyad with a positive affect.

3. Schedler and Block
   * Longitudinal study on pre-schoolers eventual alcohol and drug abuse activity.
   * Years later, videotapes of these pre-schoolers playing with their mothers were analyzed.
   * The parents of the eventual users had definite distinguishing characteristics that were exactly the opposite of what is taught in Special Play.
   * The parents of the eventual users were directive, critical, very focused on performance, tense, and non-responsive to the child's initiative.

SPECIAL PLAY

SPECIAL PLAY OR "DON'T BOSS, DON'T TEACH"

As a parent, you lead your child by example, teach your child right from wrong and set limits on behavior. During Special Play it is different: **for 15 minutes a day, you follow the lead of your child. During that time you really focus your attention on him/her.** While this may sound easy, fifteen minutes of undivided attention can seem like a long time.

The four simple rules of Special Play are:

1. Don't Teach
2. Don't Boss
3. Don't Judge
4. Follow the child's lead

To use Special Play at home you need to put together the toys: Make sure these toys let the child be creative with few rules, rights or wrongs and correct or incorrect ways of playing. (Toys or games with rules put the parent back in the role of teacher). Blocks, play dough, clay or leggos work well. I prefer cheap household items like buttons, popsicle sticks, plastic containers of "junk" no one else found useful, milk caps. I use ziplock bags to hold my toys.

Find a quiet place away from all distractions (especially the TV and telephone!) Then, set a timer for 15 minutes. You may be tempted to make the time shorter than 15 minutes but DON'T. The time is important and helps make Special Play effective.

REMEMBER SPECIAL PLAY:

* ...is like a prescription -- it should be given by 1 parent at a time, to 1 child at a time. You can write another prescription for your other children.
* ...is a lot of fun to see how well it works for families.

SPECIAL PLAY

CHILD REACTIONS

This can be a very rewarding experience for both the adult and the child.

The child may move quickly in a direction opposite to the way feelings have been expressed.

The child may behave in an exaggerated or more forceful manner.

The child may become very aggressive, or very quiet, or resort to very baby-like behavior, or like to order you around, taking complete control of the situation.

The child may be unable to express feelings at the beginning, or at first, act as though only negative feelings are being experienced.

The child may want you to make decisions, or may do things just to please you because you are spending time alone together.

Try to reflect all of these feelings and behaviors as they occur, rather than to give explanations or to make the choices for the child.

You should learn a great deal about how the child feels at different times about you and others.

You will probably also learn more about your own feelings toward the child.

SPECIAL PLAY

PARENTS SHOULD ENGAGE IN SPECIAL PLAY WITH THEIR CHILDREN BECAUSE:

1. Special Play gives parents an opportunity to give their undivided attention to their child each day.
2. Children like getting attention from their parents.
3. Researchers tell us that Special Play improves parent-child relationships.
4. Parents who engage in Special Play report that their relationships with their children improve.
5. Parents and children find Special Play to be a mutually satisfying and enjoyable experience.
6. *Finally, and most importantly, Special Play has been proven to reduce children's behavior problems at school and at home if it is done every day.*

SPECIAL PLAY

LIMITS AND RESTRICTIONS

There are a few restrictions on the child's activities in the Special Play session. These limits must be adhered to rigidly. If the child should break a limit or rule, you should point out that this particular behavior is not allowed. Warn the child that if it occurs a second time, the Special Play session will end for that occasion. Make sure the child understands. There is no warning statement or second chance. This is the one and only consequence of breaking a limit. The session ends without you having to get angry. It is very important, if a session must be ended early because of the child's actions, that you state the date and time of the next session. This tells the child that the actions and the choices made in one session will not affect the occurrence of your future sessions together. The limits are:

1. The child may not hit, throw at, pinch, push, leap on, or attempt to hurt or endanger you in any way.
2. The child may not endanger himself or herself in any way.
3. The child may not deliberately destroy expensive or irreplaceable toys.
4. The child may not run in and out of the play area.
5. The play period is not extended.
6. There is no undressing except for jackets and shoes.

Do not discuss these limits with the child until the need arises. And do not try to prevent or discourage the child from breaking a limit. Your task, when prohibited behavior first occurs (or is about to occur) is to let the child know options for the expression of the feeling or need, and the consequence if the feeling or need is expressed in an unacceptable manner again. The consequence is termination of the session. If the child does choose to engage in an unacceptable behavior anyway during that or a future session (a) acknowledge and accept the strong desire to do what was done, and (b) always, without exception, impose the consequence immediately. Remember that your purpose is not to prevent the behavior, but to allow the child to make the choice and to experience the consequence.

SPECIAL PLAY

PARENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPECIAL PLAY

Dressing/Undressing Time

The key to Special Play as you are getting your child dressed or undressed is to allow enough time for the activity. This may mean getting up a few minutes earlier, or starting your evening routine with some time to spare. As you give your child choices about what to wear or what to take off first, you are following your child's lead.

Mealtime

Not all mealtimes can be relaxed, but try to choose one meal during the day when you will have enough time for interaction. Talk may focus around food preparation, different foods you are serving, which foods are particularly enjoyable, or any topic relating to the child's life. It is hard for young children to sit at the table for long periods of time, so let them take a break, or leave the table when they have finished.

Car Time

You, as the adult, must focus on the road when you are driving. But even careful drivers can engage with their passengers – and children tend to be better passengers if they are involved. A relaxed conversation in which your child takes the lead, or a sing-along for which he/she chooses the songs, are both possible and appropriate.

Coming And Going Time

Arrival at school and departure for home are both important transition times. Plan to have at least a little time to get your child settled on arrival, to read a short story, visit the class pet, or look at a special toy. Show your support through your interest and your warm but clear good-bye. When picking up your child, allow her to see connections between you and the teacher. Take a moment to allow your child to share something important about the day while you are still in the school setting.

Bath Time

If it is not hurried, bath time provides an ideal setting for Special Play interaction. Bath toys have wonderful properties as they float, get dunked, and come into contact with each other. The water itself provides many opportunities for play. Children relax naturally in the water. Take advantage of and enjoy play opportunities with bath-time toys or games that your child initiates.

Book Time

Reading a book to a child is often the last activity of the day. This is a natural time for close contact and shared meanings. Your child may be in your lap or next to you on a chair or bed. As you read, be aware of responses and questions that you can extend.

Bedtime

Bedtime is often accompanied by a ritual, but it is also a moment to feel close and loving. Children sometimes share important thoughts and feelings during the last moments before falling asleep.

SPECIAL PLAY

AM I A GOOD SPECIAL PLAYER?

Do I observe the behavior, language, and gestures of the children in my group?
Example:

Do I observe each child's style of relating?
Example:

Do I approach each child slowly, with respect and thoughtfulness?
Example:

How often do I allow each child to take the lead? Do I follow that lead?
Example:

Do I expand and extend a child's drama by staying involved with his/her play theme and helping to elaborate the details?
Example:

Do I let a child know through gesture, facial expressions, emotional tone, and supportive body posture that I am there for her?
Example:

Do I know when to be verbally responsive, and when it's better to quietly share a child's emotion?
Example:

Do I work with parents to understand the emotional needs of children?
Example:

During Special Play, an adult remembers to...

* approach children with compassion and a keen interest in their ideas.
* join in children's play themes without dominating them.
* allow a child to be a participant during storytelling, or direct the action of a drama, rather than engaging in activities where the child is the observer.
* follow a child's lead by respecting the child's ideas and ability to make decisions.
* look for ways to engage children in two-way communication by responding to and building on their emotional tone, signals, or ideas.

SPECIAL PLAY

SPECIAL PLAY ACTIVITY RECORD

For recording individual adult/child interactions

Child's name _____ Date _____

Age _____ Name of teacher _____

1. Describe the child's overall mood and temperament. (When applicable, include any information shared by parents or guardians that could affect the child's mood or behavior.)

_____

_____

_____

2. Special Play Activity

Describe the following:

* The child's play theme or apparent interest/concern:

_____

_____

_____

* How you followed the child's lead:

_____

_____

_____

* Something important you observed about this child today (*if applicable*):

_____

_____

_____

_____

* Follow-up observations or comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____